

Learning to Think

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The new education has as its purpose the development of a new kind of person...an actively inquiring, flexible, creative, innovative, tolerant, liberal personality who can face uncertainty and ambiguity without disorientation, who can formulate viable new meanings to meet changes in the environment which threaten individual and mutual survival.¹

In *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner argue that we need to educate students much more thoughtfully and critically than we do now. They maintain that we rely too much on information dissemination in classrooms, asking students to listen passively, trust authorities, memorize random details, and exhibit their learning in decontextualized ways (largely on paper-and-pencil tests). In the process, we create a generation of citizens who will believe just about any information we feed them as they lack the habits and dispositions needed to think critically about the world, to be what Postman and Weingartner call “crap detectors.” A competent crap detector “is not completely captivated by the arbitrary abstractions of the community in which he [or she] happened to grow up,”² and instead, is a creative, active inquirer who asks questions, challenges taken-for-granted, and probes the world around them for meaning. In effect, crap detectors see cultivating natality, or the disposition to think deeply about meaning, as an educational ideal.

Perhaps what is most striking about Postman and Weingartner’s call is how contemporarily relevant it seems, despite the fact that they were writing almost forty years ago. Sadly, not much seems to have changed in how we do education. Rarely are our schools places where students are asked to think deeply about meaning. The current climate of high-stakes accountability only exacerbates this trend. As Stephanie Mackler persuasively argues, our schools contribute to the excess of meaninglessness that we see around us and, concurrently, to the ways we cling, however unconsciously, to the banal. They do this through offering a vision of learning built more around acquiring information than asking questions and solving problems, and through relying on an approach to assessment that is standardized, abstract, and regimented, instead of authentic and developmental. This critique of schooling is all too familiar. Progressive educators, constructivists, democratic educators, critical theorists, and educational philosophers alike have long been saying that schools should do a much better job of helping students to think, instead of feeding them predetermined interpretations of the world that they are asked to passively consume. For example, Paulo Freire eloquently states that the goal of teaching should not be “to transfer knowledge, but to create the possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge.”³ Yet while this critique of schooling is familiar, what Mackler does so well is to allude to the deep and damaging philosophical consequences of such an education: adults who are seduced by banal clichés and “commonsense” arguments are easily prey to manipulation. They experience a resulting sense of alienation and rootlessness in their lives.

Throughout her essay, Mackler compels us to think more deeply about questions of meanings, purposes, and possibilities both within education and more broadly in how we live in the world. She argues convincingly that many of us suffer from an excess of meaninglessness in our lives. While she only really talks about this in general and somewhat abstract ways, we do not have to look far to see concrete examples of this sense of meaninglessness: instrumentally rational students who are driven solely by the desire to get good grades; educational slogans that are stunningly platitudinous, such as “all children can learn”; adults who buy into the binary rhetorics needed to support problematic domestic and foreign policies (“you are either with us or against us” or “in the coalition of the willing or the axis of evil”); educational policies that purport to “leave no child behind” while doing precisely that; and obsession with (coupled with ridiculous media attention to) the vacuous culture of celebrity. In fact, I would argue that the consequences of meaninglessness are even more damning than Mackler seems to suggest. It is not just that we are disenchanted with our lives, often feeling alienated and isolated, but that we fill voids in individually, socially, environmentally, economically, and culturally destructive ways, largely through excessive consumption and acritical worship of the gods of the market. Many of us suffer from the twin diseases of self-centered individualism and affluenza, “a painful, contagious, socially transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety, and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more.”⁴ An excess of meaninglessness leads to an excess of consumption, where we try to find meaning in things regardless of the costs to our emotional, familial, and communal health. It is scary to think that we now have twice as many malls in this country as we have high schools, that we have more cars than registered drivers, and that increasingly people see shopping both as a form of entertainment and therapy.⁵ We are growing more isolated from our neighbors, addicted to technological gadgets, and oblivious to the suffering around us.

The alternative to lives characterized by an excess of meaninglessness are ones in which we are able to uncover the limits of our typically impoverished, habitual forms of sense making and instead are accustomed to seeking out the novel, the creative, the alternative, and the possible. Mackler calls this alternative a disposition to cultivate natality and suggests that as educators, we can help turn this disposition into an educational ideal. This would require refashioning schools as places where we think deeply about meaning. Obviously, I fully support this call and am compelled to think about what it practically requires of us. Mackler implies that, minimally, we need to cultivate some important capacities; for example, we must be able to uncover existing banal interpretations, ask critical and probing questions, dwell productively amid uncertainty, and imagine new meanings. In essence, we need to teach people to think more philosophically and/or more critically. Fortunately, we have many resources to help us to do so. For example, in recent presidential addresses to the Philosophy of Education Society, our colleagues offer compelling advice. Ann Diller argues that we must help students see the world from different angles and perspectives and be open to fundamental changes in their worldviews;⁶ Nicholas Burbules suggests that we ought to develop in students the

virtue of *metis*, or the capacity to navigate among perspectives and craft new resources for meaning making and problem solving;⁷ Sharon Bailin maintains that we should explore cross cultural perspectives more thoughtfully so that we may better see our own assumptions and beliefs and so that we may imagine other possibilities.⁸

In the end, I fully agree with Mackler's central claim that we should posit natality as one of the most important aims of education, if not the most important aim. Moreover, I appreciate the range of philosophical resources she brings to bear on our thinking about this aim and the ways in which she reminds us how important it is to think in sustained ways about questions of meaning. Yet I am also left wondering how the call for cultivating natality is different from simply saying that one of the fundamental goals of education should be to nurture and promote critical thinking, something that most certainly entails the disposition to see the limits of our understandings and interpretations and to imagine new ones. I wonder if maybe I am missing something in her conception of natality, something that would make it perhaps a richer or more robust goal than simply learning to think critically (though I fully realize this is never simple). Is there something perhaps natal in the very conception of natality she imagines? Or is there really very little difference between the vision she offers us today and the one described by Postman and Weingartner almost forty years ago (and fashioned in many different, yet similarly evocative, ways since then)? This is a vision of an educational system that produces active, critical thinkers, crap detectors who are unsatisfied with banal interpretations of the world around them and who are disposed to seek out new, healthier, and more meaningful ways to live their lives and, concurrently, to create the conditions for others to do so as well.

1. Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (New York: Dell, 1969), 218.

2. *Ibid.*, 5.

3. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 30.

4. John DeGraaf, David Wann, and Thomas H. Naylor, *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic*, 2d ed. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2005), 2.

5. *Ibid.*, 13, 33, and 17.

6. Ann Diller, "Facing the Torpedo Fish: Becoming a Philosopher of One's Own Education," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 1998*, ed. Steven Tozer (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1999).

7. Nicholas C. Burbules, "2001: A Philosophical Odyssey," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2001*, ed. Suzanne Rice (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2002).

8. Sharon Bailin, "An Inquiry into Inquiry: (How) Can We Learn from Other Times and Places," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2006*, ed. Daniel Vokey (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2007).